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Resilience in British social policy: Depoliticising risk and regulating deviance

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Abstract

Over the past decade, resilience has emerged as a key priority linking disparate areas of British policy. Yet research to date has focused heavily on resilience as a dimension of international development and security agendas. This paper maps the movement of resilience into British social policy. It finds that, as in other areas of policy, resilience in social policy functions to depoliticise, placing the structural determinants of gender, racial and other inequalities beyond the reach of policymakers. Yet, in a departure from academic accounts of resilience, in social policy resilience appears to play another role: that of regulating social deviance.

Introduction

Resilience, broadly, refers to the capacity of a population, system or individual to deal with adversity. This could be by ‘bouncing back’ to its original shape, or by transforming in response to environmental change. The concept often suggests a transformation of policymakers’ relationship to risk, going beyond modernist approaches which sought to identify and contain risk and introducing a ‘post-classical’ (Chandler, 2014a; 2014b) approach which accepts that risk is an inescapable fact of life. Building resilience has emerged as a key objective of British policy in a number of fields, most notably security (Chandler, 2012), development (Levin et al., 2012), and environmental (Nelson et al., 2007) policy. As a result, resilience has drawn considerable attention from scholars of public policy (for example Chandler, 2014a; 2014b; Duffield, 2013; Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 2013), with commentators by turns condemning it as merely another evolution of ‘bad old’ neoliberal styles of governance, or acknowledging that resilience cannot be pinned down to a single meaning. Yet it has also been the subject of academic inquiries outside the field of public policy, particularly in ecology (Holling, 1973; Gunderson, 2000) and psychology (Masten et al., 1990; Masten and Powell, 2003).

With some exceptions (Harrison, 2012; Welsh, 2014; Bottrell, 2013), few scholars have paid attention to manifestations of resilience in social policy, and there have been no systemic analyses of resilience in British social policy. Yet resilience has begun to make inroads here. While certainly less developed than in other areas of policy, resilience is a

thread running through government initiatives relating to, among other things, education (DfE, 2011), health (DH, 2013), crime (Home Office, 2007) and unemployment (DWP, 2016). It is frequently – although not exclusively – a strategy for working with young people thought to be vulnerable due to social exclusion, troubled upbringing or low self-esteem. Building resilience often forms a central part of strategies for tackling disadvantage and inequality. It is foregrounded, for example, in Government Equalities Office literature on body confidence (2013; 2014) and in Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) literature on welfare and employment (DWP, 2016).

The emergence of resilience in social policy is potentially significant. ‘Resilience-thinking’ (Walker and Salt, 2012) represents an evolution of risk governance (Renn and Klinke, 2015), which has already had a significant impact on social policy, particularly in the area of health (Petersen, 1996). The governance of risk in social policy has come under fire from feminist scholars, who note the ways in which risk discourses may be used to govern women’s behaviour through shame, from constructions of women as ‘at risk’ of rape or sexual assault (Hall, 2004), and therefore required to monitor their own behaviour, or when pregnant, responsible for managing an ever-expanding list of risks lest they ‘fail’ to act as responsible mothers (Lupton, 2012). Risk therefore plays a role in the regulation of individual behaviour, particularly that regarded as deviant. As an evolution of risk governance, resilience may be similarly important.

This article therefore investigates the entry of resilience into British social policy. It presents the findings of a qualitative content analysis of policy literature published between

2005 and 2016 which compares resilience in social policy to resilience in two other fields (security and development). It finds that resilience is implicated in the *depoliticisation of risk*. This follows from the argument of critics that resilience can function to render power structures invisible and re-cast suffering as inevitable, equipping citizens as it does with the tools to manage suffering but not to resist its causes. The analysis presented here adds to this account by demonstrating that in social policy, discourses of resilience conceptualise factors such as gender and ethnicity as ‘beyond control’ and out of the reach of policymakers. The impact of power structures on the individual is therefore naturalised. However, this article also finds that resilience in social policy does not merely mimic resilience in other fields. Rather, in social policy resilience functions to regulate social deviance. It is directed at the creation of risk-averse citizens who are also virtuous: they do not smoke, take drugs or have promiscuous sex; they do not riot and they are able to counter extremist narratives – and above all they take responsibility for their lives. As with ‘older’ styles of risk governance (Castel, 1991; Giddens, 1999; Lupton, 1999; Petersen, 1996), then, resilience may target the creation of moral citizens.

Resilience, neoliberalism and risk

Authors note the polysemic nature of resilience (Reghazza-Zitt et al 2012; Rogers 2017). The concept has travelled between numerous fields, each time shifting slightly in meaning. Genealogies of resilience (Rogers, 2017) suggest that multiple relatively stable meanings can be identified. One common understanding of resilience is drawn from engineering, where resilience denotes the property of a material: its ability to ‘bounce back’ to a

predetermined shape. This implies stability and resistance to (negative) change (Reghazza-Zitt et al., 2012 par.10; Rogers, 2017; Walker and Cooper, 2011). When applied to humans, this form of resilience becomes a metaphor for their capacity to recover from or resist the effects of shock and illness (Rogers, 2017).

In other contexts, however, resilience suggests transformation. In ecological uses, resilience has often meant the ability of an ecosystem to absorb shock and adapt to it while maintaining the same function (Holling, 1973), implying structural change (Reghazza-Zitt et al., 2012 par.9; Walker and Cooper, 2011: 145-146). In psychology, resilience has been used to designate a process of positive adaptation in which individuals overcome risk or adversity (Masten et al., 1990; Masten and Powell, 2003). All this has led Peter Rogers (2013; 2017) to describe it as rhizomatic, consisting of multiple iterations of meaning, none of which are logically ‘prior’ to any other (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988).

Resilience is similarly polysemic when used in policy literature. Here, again, resilience might mean the capacity of a system or community to return to a predetermined shape, or it might imply a process of transformation in the face of trauma (Chandler, 2014a: 5-9). Resilience is theorised to be necessary in a world in which it is not always possible to foresee disasters, prevent them, or completely shield populations from their effects. In policy literature, resilience is often overtly community-focused, suggesting participation, collaboration and empowerment of citizens (Rogers, 2013). Some accounts of resilience suggest that when led by non-hierarchical networks, resilience initiatives can express ‘transformative, alternative counter-neoliberal discourses of self, community and society’

(Cretney, 2014: 635) and encourage countercultural activism (Cretney and Bond, 2014; Nelson, 2014).

Other articulations of resilience, however, prioritise organisational and technological concerns while allowing the community little opportunity to participate (Cretney, 2014; Rogers, 2013). Thus, some accounts of resilience have not been inclined to view it as a positive new episteme. In these evaluations, state articulations of resilience are seen as an extension of existing governance practices. Critics have pointed out that resilience's emphasis on individual adaptability is not always far removed from forms of neoliberal governance which emphasise individuals' responsibility for their own well-being while dismantling state provision for welfare at the macro-level (Joseph, 2013; Reid, 2012; Harrison, 2012; Duffield, 2013; Joseph, 2016; Evans and Reid, 2013). That the aim of governance might be to produce responsible, self-managing citizens is hardly a new observation. It is associated in particular with Foucauldian accounts of the neoliberal subject. For Foucault, neoliberal governance exhorts individuals to develop their personal aptitudes, aspirations and skills (2008: 215-237), qualities which may then be 'tapped' (Calkin, 2015) by the forces of capitalism. This is accompanied by a moralistic rhetoric of personal responsibility (Forkert, 2014; Petersen, 1996).

Against the backdrop of Foucauldian critiques of neoliberal governance, the emphasis of state articulations of resilience on the development of individuals' personal qualities and responsibility does not seem so new. They also strongly resemble forms of risk governance that predate resilience but nonetheless have offered similar individualised solutions to

policy problems. For many social theorists, risk management has been a central feature of modern society, dubbed the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998). For Ulrich Beck, this occurred not because society had become more hazardous, but rather due to the increasing recognition that catastrophic events such as plagues or famines, once believed to emanate from external forces such as God or nature, could be brought under human control – and might even have origins in human organisation. For Beck risk represents the *politicisation of danger*, the realisation that danger can be avoided or mitigated by human intervention. This was regarded as fundamental to the process of modernisation (Elliot, 2002: 295).

Risk, on one hand, is conceptualised as a concern of social planners, with risk management to be undertaken at the macro-level. For Giddens, however, the emergence of the risk society implies greater levels of *individual* responsibility for managing risk:

Many people get ill through no fault of their own. But a large proportion of illnesses are related both to lifestyle practises and to wider conditions of the 'created environment'. It doesn't make any sense to suppose that liability in these circumstances can remain wholly with the collectivity, whether this be government or an insurance company. The active assumption of responsibility, as in attempts to reduce levels of smoking, becomes part of the very definition of risk situations (Giddens, 1999: 9).

According to Giddens, the risk society therefore requires welfare reform in order to make individuals responsible for the risks they face as a result of their lifestyles. Authors following Beck and Giddens have noted the tendency in practice for risk governance to move away from interventions at the macro-level and take aim at individual behaviour. Some authors (Castel, 1991; Rose, 2001; Petersen, 1996) argue that risk has been displaced

onto individuals, who are increasingly expected to manage their own relationship to it. This privatisation of risk is central to the neoliberal project's requirement for citizens to self-govern. This process of 'responsibilisation' (Burchell, 1993: 276) is a key focus of the critical literature on risk. As risk is increasingly conceptualised as a consequence of an individual's lifestyle choices, to engage in risky behaviour is treated as a personal moral failing as individuals 'choose to ignore' risks (Lupton, 1999: 429) and therefore place themselves in danger. The sociocultural contexts in which 'risky' lifestyle choices are made are unaccounted for; blame is displaced entirely onto the victim. This has a gender dimension: risk is attached to women's bodies in particular, especially in pregnancy, during which time women face heightened disapprobation if perceived to be behaving irresponsibly (Lupton, 2012).

In some configurations, resilience does not appear to be such a departure from older, risk-based forms of governance, which had already undergone a wholesale shift in the direction of individualisation and responsibilisation by the time resilience became a policy buzzword. The resilient subjects of policy are similarly expected to be prepared, aware and self-reflexive (Joseph, 2013: 42). They 'do not look to states to secure their wellbeing because they have been disciplined into believing in the necessity to secure it for themselves' (Reid, 2012: 69). Disaster management strategies shift from saving the lives of those affected by disaster to promoting coping strategies and self-help (Duffield, 2013: 56). International security strategies shift from intervention to prevention (Chandler, 2012). State provision of welfare is 'rolled back' in favour of community-led initiatives (Harrison, 2012).

However, even these critics of resilience do acknowledge something new about its implications for governance: the re-problematisation of disasters as necessary phenomena. Critics have taken aim at what they see as the celebration, in some articulations of resilience, of the inevitability of disaster. Julian Reid observes that in sustainable development strategies, disasters are increasingly portrayed not as threats to humanity, but as opportunities for communities to implement social change, and become responsible for their own survival (2012). This requires acceptance that the world is inherently disastrous and security is fleeting. The objective is to learn to bear suffering, rather than to change the world such that suffering does not occur – rhetoric which serves to conceal suffering's origins in human agency. In this form of resilience-thinking, disasters come to be seen as inescapable facts of life for the communities affected by them. Yet the incidence of heavy flooding and other natural disasters is linked to climate change resulting from human activity (Hirabayashi et al., 2013; van Aalst, 2006). This fact is obscured in articulations of resilience which imbue subjects with responsibility for bearing the effects of natural disasters while removing any basis for resisting their causes. Following the above accounts of risk, we might say that if risk initially represented the politicisation of danger, some policy articulations of resilience represent its depoliticisation, obscuring the political nature of danger, suffering and disaster.

The research

If resilience can mean different things in different fields, the task here is to ascertain how its meaning has shifted with its entry into social policy. Resilience has been the focus of significant social initiatives in England, such as the Resilience Programme, which was piloted in schools between 2007 and 2010 with the aim of promoting schoolchildren's wellbeing by increasing their resilience (Challen et al., 2011). In some social policy documents, building resilience, especially in children and young people, is explicitly portrayed as a government-spanning objective, cutting across the Department of Health (DH) in relation to mental and sexual health, 'the Home Office in terms of civic disorder and crime, the Government Equalities Office in relation to body confidence, and the Department for Education in terms of teenage pregnancy' (DH, 2013: 16-17).

Nonetheless, as a concept resilience is less well-developed in UK social policy than it is in security, development and environmental policy. When social policy documents mention resilience, this often takes the form of a buzzword which is not clearly defined or developed. Conversely, in the latter areas of policy, the concept is likely to be given more substance and used consistently. The bulk of academic commentary on resilience in public policy has concentrated on these latter areas. Critical approaches to resilience, however, suggest that the entry of resilience into social policy may be significant. If, in some resilience discourses, resilience functions to individualise and responsibilise while covering over the origins of suffering in human activity and power structures, it seems reasonable to suspect that it might operate the same way in social policy. This much is implied by Elizabeth Harrison's account of the uses of resilience in welfare policy, which finds that resilience 'diverts attention away from structural considerations, including how

gender relations within families are constituted and reinforced by factors beyond those families’ (2012: 109). Similarly, Dorothy Bottrell (2013) suggests that in practice, resilience may be ‘embedded in the interrelationship of policies and strategies directed toward the realisation of neoliberal ideals.’

For this reason, this article sets out the findings of a qualitative content analysis of policy literature published from 2005 to 2016. A literature search for uses of the word ‘resilience’ was conducted using the Publications portal of the Gov.uk website¹. This search was not exhaustive. It can be difficult to find policy documents produced before 2010, when new policy was put in place requiring government documents to be made available through the Gov.uk portal, and many relevant documents did not show up in the initial search. However, it was deemed inappropriate to exclude pre-2010 policy literature altogether, as resilience-thinking in social policy was already well in development by 2010 (a post-2010 search would have excluded the Resilience Programme, for example). Furthermore, some post-2010 policy documents already known to the researcher did not show up using the Gov.uk search. Therefore, extra searches were conducted using search terms related to relevant policy areas (for example, ‘mental health’ and ‘wellbeing’). These turned up further documents containing references to resilience. As such, the analysis presented here cannot offer a definitive account of every single social policy document which mentions the word ‘resilience’. However, the searches amassed enough documents for saturation (Morse, 1995) to be reached, allowing an account to be generated of how the concept’s meaning has crystallised.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications>

Due to the rather less developed nature of resilience in social policy, the literature search was wide in scope and included White Papers, Green Papers and research reports. Mentions of resilience were found primarily in documents produced by the DH, the new executive body Public Health England (PHE), the Department for Education (DfE), the Home Office, the DWP, and the GEO. Articles were discarded from the sample if their use of the term ‘resilience’ was shallow and buzzword-esque (i.e. it was only mentioned once or twice in passing and lacked clear conceptualisation). A similar search was conducted for documents produced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the Department for International Development (DfID) – two of the departments in which resilience-thinking is most well-developed. This allowed for a comparison between resilience frames in social policy and in fields where it is more established. Following the above discussion, the analysis aimed to assess constructions of both risk and resilience in the documents. The analysis was informed by Carol Bacchi’s ‘What’s the Problem?’ (1999) approach to the policy analysis, which asks:

- What is the problem ... represented to be either in a specific policy debate or in a specific policy proposal?
- What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation?
- What effects are produced by this representation? How are subjects constituted within it? What is likely to change? What is likely to stay the same? Who is likely to benefit from this representation?
- What is left unproblematic in this representation? (Bacchi, 1999: 12-13)

Key for this analysis are questions of how the ‘problem’ of risk – and the ‘solution’ of resilience – are portrayed across policy fields, and how subjects are constituted within these

representations. This constructivist approach to policy analysis allows for the possibility that the meanings of both resilience and risk might shift as they enter into different policy sub-fields, as well as, crucially, offering a framework for assessing silences in the policy literature.

Depoliticising risk

This section considers portrayals of risk in the documents. In documents produced by DEFRA and DfID, the ‘problems’ of adversity and disaster are consistently placed beyond the reach of human intervention. Climate change and the resultant extreme weather events are presupposed as inevitabilities requiring adaptation on the part of, for example, farmers in developing nations, who are required to become ‘resilient and “climate smart”’ (DfID, 2015: 24). Natural disasters, including those linked to human activity, are here conceptualised as exogenous shocks or stresses upon the system (DfID, 2011: 8), to be borne by those affected, but not resisted. In these documents, resilient subjects are those who adapt to risk, but do not question the circumstances in which risks are generated. The political character of climate change is thereby obscured.

A particularly striking example of this is found in the *National Flood Emergency Framework for England*’s (DEFRA, 2014: 3) proclamation that ‘flooding happens!’ As the document goes on to assert, ‘no part of England can expect to escape the impact of flooding entirely’ (p. 3). While the *Framework* does, of course, set in place strategies for managing and (where possible) preventing floods, substantial emphasis is placed on *preparedness* for

inevitable flooding, including constant vigilance to ‘risks, threats and vulnerabilities’ (2014: 23) as well as having plans in place to assist with recovery. The recovery process itself falls outside of the scope of the document, and readers are directed towards online resilience toolkits produced by the Cabinet Office (2014: 4). In sum: while central government intervention in flooding does form part of the *Framework*, this is not linked to any broader environmental strategy which might decrease the incidence of flooding. The role of climate change is acknowledged, but in the passive voice – the impact of human activity on the climate is not part of the discussion. Critical assessment of resilience-thinking in DEFRA and DfID policy thus supports the earlier assertion that danger has been depoliticised.

The social policy documents also tended to focus on risk, with the ‘problems’ of social exclusion and disadvantage now portrayed in terms of ‘risk factors’ and ‘deficit factors’. Risks are bracketed into those which can be altered and those which cannot. Take this statement from the DH’s *Framework for Sexual Health Improvement in England*:

A wide range of factors has been shown to influence adolescent health outcomes. Many of these are ‘deficit’ factors, such as growing up in a single-parent family or living in a deprived area. However, these factors are clearly beyond the control of adolescents, and many resilient young people who grow up in difficult circumstances do have positive outcomes (2013: 16).

Here, risk/deficit factors are assumed to be ‘beyond control’, leading to the assertion that the only course of action open to policymakers is to operate to increase resilience at the

level of the individual. This statement from Home Office research on ‘resilience to drug use’ bears some similarities:

The evidence indicates that risk and protective factors are context dependent and influence people for a variety of reasons. Some, such as gender and ethnicity, are fixed and cannot be changed. Others such as parental discipline can be altered (2007: 3).

Likewise, GEO research into body image differentiates between ‘factors which have the potential to change’ such as weight, and ‘factors such as age, ethnicity, gender which are fixed’ (Burrowes, 2013: 21). Note the portrayal of gender and ethnicity in both cases as ‘fixed’. It is not that these statements are inaccurate: individuals are of course not able to switch identity at will, and few adolescents living in deprived areas are able to change their surroundings. But consideration of human agency terminates here. Social disadvantage becomes one among many ‘risk factors’ that passively ‘accumulate’. In New Labour-era documents, it was mostly gender and race that were subjected to this treatment. After 2010, poverty and deprivation came to be similarly depoliticised, as Coalition and Conservative strategy began to locate the causes of deprivation in ‘troubled families’ (Levitas, 2012).

Any prospect for restructuring society such that gender, ethnicity and poverty do not have such a detrimental impact cannot be ‘thought’ in the context of policy that individualises risk in this way. It is not so much that the documents proffer a deterministic account of these factors, but rather that the onus for dealing with the effects of gender, ethnicity and poverty is displaced onto the individual. As inequalities are converted into ‘risk factors’,

they are re-conceptualised as existing beyond the reach of policy; intervention, now, is only possible at the micro-level and not at the macro-level of social structures.

Creating the resilient subject

This section turns to constructions of resilience itself. In DEFRA and DfID documents, the constructions of resilience on offer tend to lean towards a ‘post-classical’ (Chandler, 2014a; 2014b) variant – rather than simply ‘bouncing back’ to a predetermined shape, the ideal is often to ‘bounce back better’ (DfID, 2011a: 9) by ‘maintaining or *transforming* living standards in the face of shocks or stresses’ (DfID, 2011a: 6; emphasis mine; see also DfID, 2011b: 10). In contrast, social policy documents often worked with a definition of resilience which merely emphasised ‘the capacity to “bounce back” from adversity’ (Public Health England, 2014: 4). There are some exceptions to this: for example, one DfE document adopts a definition of resilience as the ‘adaptive outcome of a developmental process’ (Rutter cited in DfE, 2011: i), while another lists ‘a belief in one’s own self-efficacy and ability to deal with change and adaptation’ (2016: 8) as a key component of resilience. So far, this variance in definitions is unsurprising.

However, a closer look at the social policy documents reveals a significant departure from the meanings of resilience outlined in recent academic literature. Here, resilience also comes to mean resistance to forms of activity regarded as undesirable or socially deviant, including risk-taking behaviour. In the same Home Office research on drug use, ‘resilience is defined as those behaviours and methods that young people utilise in making their

decisions not to use drugs, despite being exposed to drugs and other risk factors' (2007: 4). The document explains: 'to be considered resilient the young people selected for the study needed to have had the opportunity to use drugs and to have almost always chosen not to use them' (2007: 5). Resilience *explicitly* means resistance here, with the presupposition that exposure to drugs is a 'risk factor' to be withstood, requiring the development of a personal quality to do so. In other Home Office research, on anti-social behaviours in children, resilience is used to describe 'high risk' children 'who self-reported involvement in none or only one type of anti-social or problem behaviour' (2008: 17); in other words, avoidance of undesirable behaviours.

This usage of resilience continued in the post-New Labour years. A similar formulation can be found in a DfE research report on resilience to (violent) extremism (DfE, 2011). Following both classical and post-classical definitions of resilience, one might expect 'resilience to violent extremism' to refer to the capacity of communities to repair or transform in the wake of an act of terrorism. But instead, resilience is again explicitly defined as *resistance*: 'a process in which people can overcome or resist negative influences that block (for instance) emotional well-being and/or achievement' (p. 10). Throughout, the phrase 'resilience to extremism' is used to mean resistance to extremism: the ability to identify and challenge extremist narratives.

In the *Government Response to the Riots* (DCLG, 2013), produced following the 2011 riots in cities across England, resilience is conceived of as an aspect of one's character, 'critical to achieving to the best of one's quality at school, staying away from risky behaviour,

deciding on what kind of career one wants, and finding a way to achieve those goals’ (DCLG, 2013: 19). Similarly, in the sexual health *Framework*, resilient young people are thought to ‘understand the benefits of loving, healthy relationships and delaying sex’ (DH, 2013: 13), resulting in less risky behaviour. Across a range of policy documents dealing with different areas of social life, resilience is thought to result in less risk-taking behaviour, and indeed is sometimes treated as synonymous with the avoidance of risk.

There is a moral element to this. In their avoidance of risk, resilient subjects are conceptualised not just as confident and happy people but as upstanding moral citizens: they do not riot, take drugs, or have promiscuous sex, and cannot be influenced by extremist narratives. In short, they do not participate in activities regarded as socially deviant. There is a tacit conservatism to these norms, especially regarding sex, drugs and family life. This suggests is that resilience in social policy is not a value-neutral approach to governing uncertainty, but a value-laden approach to the regulation of social deviance. Resilient subjects are self-regulating subjects, and their self-regulation is imbued with a (sometimes conservative) morality.

Yet at the same time, resilience is conceptualised as a means of addressing inequality. For starters, in the documents analysed, resilience operates along explicitly gendered lines to address gender inequalities. It may be explicitly stated that measures aimed at changing individual choices must take matters of identity into account, as ‘such choices are influenced by complicated drivers of human action, including gender roles, inequality and norms around sexuality’ (DH, 2013: 23). Mobilising resilience thus requires strategies targeted at differently-gendered populations. One such population is girls and young

women, a group conceptualised as potentially suffering from low self-esteem resulting from negative body image. This approach to building resilience comes to the fore in GEO research (Burrowes, 2013), which acknowledges that men can suffer low body image (especially gay and non-white men), but stresses that women, especially young women, are more likely to. The result is presented as a lack of self-esteem resulting in increased risk-taking in the form of crash dieting, unsafe sex, multiple sex partners, sex after drinking or using drugs, and smoking (Burrowes, 2013: 14).

Resilience-building may consequently be targeted at the reduction of primarily feminine ‘deficits’ such as poor body confidence. Increasing resilience therefore requires interventions aimed at individual women, including both exercise-based and psychotherapeutic interventions (2013: 21-24). These insights were put into practice in the GEO’s Body Confidence Campaign, which facilitated a number of such interventions (GEO, 2013; 2014). Some attention is given to the role of broader social causes of negative body image, and the document suggests that it may help to ‘chang[e] the types of images that are portrayed in the media’ (GEO, 2014: 22). This assertion is relatively undeveloped in this document, although the GEO has elsewhere worked with industry to promote diverse body images in advertising (GEO, 2013).

These findings pair with existing research on resilience and poverty which suggests that resilience may also be covertly gendered. Harrison (2012) observes that resilience often requires significant amounts of unpaid labour at the level of the household; for example, articulations of resilience as ‘struggling on’ rather than taking on debt require women to

change their consumption habits and engage in strategising around the household budget – while ensuring that there is still food on the table. This additional unpaid labour is rarely acknowledged in the resilience discourses analysed by Harrison, which instead posited resilience as a moral good and stigmatised those who ‘failed’ to bounce back. In practice, resilience has thus operated to construct a moral citizen who takes responsibility for their family and community and avoids risk and deviant behaviour. My findings, and Harrison’s, reflect other academic critiques of resilience programmes. Rogers (2013), for example, notes the policy articulation of ‘community resilience’ as an antidote to the supposed moral collapse of Britain exemplified by the 2011 London Riots. While Conservative politicians spoke in grim tones of ‘Broken Britain’ and a ‘feral underclass’ (Baker, 2012), community resilience invoked a normative community spirit and ‘the responsibilities and moral obligations of citizens to the state and to each other’ (Rogers, 2013: 324).

Discussion and conclusion

My analysis has revealed distinct meanings of ‘resilience’ emerging in social policy fields. These articulations of resilience do borrow from other fields. As in environmental and development policy, adversity is assumed to be inevitable – however, this assumption is applied to social structures that social theorists might regard as the contingent outcomes of power relations. Inequality has been portrayed as an ‘uncontrollable’ risk factor under successive New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments. As in security and development discourses, resilient subjects in social policy must accept some risk into their lives, especially those risks which they bear as a result of deprivation or their gender or race (see Table 1 for a full comparison of risk and resilience across fields).

[table 1 around here]

Yet subjects are also tasked with avoiding risk where possible. Across the documents in the sample, resilience refers to ‘resistance to’ risky behaviour; moreover, risky behaviour is coterminous with socially deviant activities, be they rioting, drug use, promiscuous sex or religious extremism. The resilient subject of social policy is therefore an upstanding moral subject who avoids risk; resilience thus is highly normative. Unlike other areas of policy, resilience here does not suggest transformation either of the individual or of the community. Individuals do not become adaptive subjects in the manner suggested by ‘post-classical’ modes of resilience (transforming in response to adversity), and communities do not transform either – rather, gendered and raced social structures are placed outside of resilience’s remit. Yet individuals are imbued with responsibility for managing risk and resisting moral deviance. Thus, neoliberal moral precepts are combined with conservative ones. There are therefore tensions between this conception of the resilient subject and broader neoliberal conceptions of the subject. While neoliberal subjects of policy are often compelled to take risks in developing their entrepreneurial spirit, in social policy thinking there are no potential positive outcomes theorised as a result of risk-taking. As Briggs and Hallin observe in their analysis of discourses of public health, independent neoliberal subjects often appear ‘as hybridized with passive subjects who need to be infused with authoritative knowledge’ (2007: 45).

‘Resistance’ is not an entirely new meaning of resilience, having as Rogers (2017) notes, roots in the Latin *resilientia*: ‘a fact of avoiding’. But in this social policy usage, there is a departure from psychological works on resilience, which do not, for the most part, conceptualise resilience as ‘resistance to’ anything. That is not to say that resilience is never normative. Some authors do explicitly reject normative approaches to resilience, observing that individuals may become resilient while engaging in activities typically regarded as deviant, such as drug use or organised crime (Ungar, 2004; Bottrell, 2009). Others take a normative approach, for example, blaming behaviour such as drug use on exposure to ‘deviant norms’ and ‘deviant peers’ (Beauvais and Oetting, 1999: 102). Yet even this heavily normative research rejects the definition of resilience as ‘resistance to deviance’, suggesting that resilience ‘does not directly affect drug use’ (Beauvais and Oetting, 1999: 105). Social policy uses of resilience therefore deviate from these academic uses.

Graham Burchell has noted that technologies of neoliberal governance ‘are not all unambiguously “bad”’ (1993: 280), and the same can be said for the polysemous concept of resilience. Readers may welcome many of the policy interventions discussed here, from counter-extremism measures, to education about sexual health risks, to measures to promote the self-esteem of girls and young women. Interventions into resilience can have beneficial effects, and it is not the intention of this paper to claim otherwise. They also do not *always* preclude other types of intervention; as part of its work on body image, the GEO has also attempted to promote body diversity in advertising, for example. However, the argument of this paper is that in current social policy practice, ‘resilience-thinking’ heavily suggests that many types of intervention are impossible or inappropriate by consigning

certain dimensions of social existence to a figurative ‘outside’ that policy cannot access. Aspects of identity such as gender, conceptualised as ‘fixed’, become depoliticised.

This depoliticisation has relevance for scholarly debate regarding the transformative potential of equality and social justice claims in policy. Feminist policy research has consistently demonstrated that, while feminist interventions in government can *potentially* fundamentally transform policy agendas (McBride and Mazur, 2010; True, 2003; True and Mintrom, 2001), in practice they tend to align with pre-existing government agendas (Bacchi and Eveline, 2003; Benschop and Verloo, 2006; Franceschet and McDonald, 2004; Rönnblom, 2009; Squires and Wickham-Jones, 2004; Teghtsoonian, 2004), fuelling wider debate about the ‘neoliberalisation’ of feminism (Budgeon, 2011; Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2009). One contention is that equality claims may be ‘shrunk’ through their reduction to a particular interpretation or policy area, resulting in other dimensions of equality being neglected, or ‘bent’ as strategies originally used to address inequality are turned to other uses, in particular to serve the needs of the market (Lombardo et al., 2009).

Shrinking and bending are at work when resilience enters social policy, with consequences for the articulation of social justice claims in policy. Claims about poverty and gender and racial inequality do make it into the social policy literature; however, they are transformed into ‘risk factors’ which are portrayed as ‘fixed’ and made into the responsibility of the individual. The policy documents are often packed with awareness that certain groups have worse outcomes (for example, worse health outcomes for black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals, especially if they are also sexual minorities), but focus on encouraging these

people to make ‘healthy choices’ (DH, 2013: 5). Subordinated identities thus become ‘at-risk’ individuals obliged to bear responsibility for their own suffering, through heightened awareness and evasion of risk. Thus, while equality claims have entered social policy, they are *shrunk* – broad critique of social power structures is missing, and the proposed solutions focus near-exclusively on the individual. They are also *bent* – claims about equality now go to work in the manufacture of responsible, risk-avoiding, moral subjects.

A question remains as to whether resilience, as a polysemic concept, can be reclaimed for social justice. Several articles have explored its emancipatory potential, suggesting that resilience is not *inherently* neoliberal, and sometimes even that policymakers have misappropriated the concept (Bottrell, 2013). Some suggest that when combined with a commitment to social justice and equality, measures to increase individual resilience can be extremely beneficial, if not enough on their own to overcome deprivation (see for example Friedli, 2009; Brown et al., 2010; Hart et al., 2016). As Hart et al. argue:

For marginalized populations, left abandoned to their own fate, the only persons available to act upon their interests may well be themselves and those in close proximity. Relying solely upon appeals to those in power to take on moral responsibility for outcomes antithetical to their own interests remains an insufficient course of action (2016: 5).

Resilience may therefore offer a way forward for communities that *cannot* count on policy to take up their interests. There is value in this argument. It would certainly not be wise to suggest that those affected by poverty and injustice should wait around for external assistance, and the work of these researchers demonstrates that the ‘vulnerable’ *can* themselves make a positive difference to their lives and surroundings (Aranda et al., 2012;

Hart et al., 2016). But a problem arises in top-down applications of this logic. Here, the (justifiable) belief that those without power *may not* be helped by those in power is transformed into the more questionable belief that they *cannot* or *should not* be helped.

Resilience may thereby feed into what Jonathan Joseph (2016) has termed ‘governance through denial’. He argues that in accepting that the world is inevitably uncertain and unpredictable, resilience-thinking results in governments denying their own power to make a difference. Joseph is addressing international perspectives on resilience and how they conceptualise state intervention into matters of international security and development. Nonetheless, the analysis presented here suggests that similar patterns have emerged in social policy. When implemented from the bottom up, resilience may well be a useful tool for social justice activists. However, when incorporated into policy programmes, it is inevitably caught up in broader governmental agendas, and can easily be put to work to individualise, responsibilise and deny government power.

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	DEFRA/DfID	Social policy
Constructions of risk	<p>Adversity and disaster portrayed as beyond control</p> <p>Subjects adapt but do not question</p> <p>Political character of disaster is obscured</p>	<p>Risk factors divided into those which can and cannot be controlled</p> <p>Gender, ethnicity and poverty placed in latter category</p> <p>Political character of gender, ethnicity and poverty is obscured</p>
Constructions of resilience	<p>'Post-classical' definitions of resilience highlighting transformation and adaptation</p>	<p>Mostly 'classical' definitions of resilience i.e. 'bouncing back' to predetermined shape</p> <p>Resilience defined as 'resistance to' social deviance (drug use, extremism, anti-social behaviour, promiscuous sex)</p>

Table 1: Constructions of risk and resilience in policy documents